



Bridgewater State University Virtual Commons - Bridgewater State University

Theatre Faculty Publications

Theatre Department

2014

[Review of the book *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* by Stacy Wolf]

Colleen Rua

Bridgewater State University, colleen.rua@bridgew.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/theater_fac

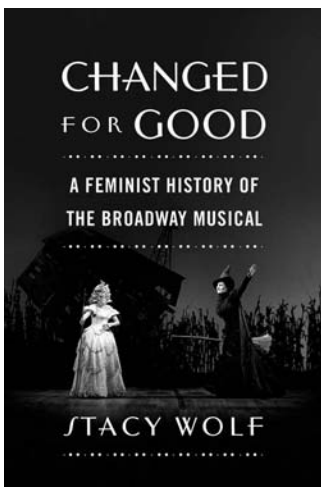
 Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Virtual Commons Citation

Rua, Colleen (2014). [Review of the book *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* by Stacy Wolf]. In *Theatre Faculty Publications*. Paper 2.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/theater_fac/2

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.



Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical. By Stacy Wolf. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 320 pp.; illustrations. \$99.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper, e-book available.

In the first pages of *Changed for Good*, Stacy Wolf gives the reader a front row seat in the audience of the 2003 hit Broadway musical *Wicked* as she describes in vivid detail the production's act one finale. In doing so, she posits *Wicked* as an exemplary work that both embraces and eschews deeply entrenched conventions of the Broadway musical. Using *Wicked* as the starting and ending points to her study, Wolf visits five decades of musicals, traces the progression of the representation of women onstage, and questions the ways in which women have disrupted the heteronormative conventions of musical theatre. Culminating with an analysis of the Elphaba/Glinda duet "Changed for Good," from which she takes her title, Wolf seeks to discover "how musicals moved from a female duet that *inter-*

rupts the romance narrative to female duets that *construct* the romantic narrative" (23). A departure from other essential but more general musical theatre histories, *Changed for Good* looks away from the male/female romantic relationship and toward female relationships and their fantastic ability to disrupt and subvert what is expected on the Broadway stage.

Surveying 19 musicals and delving more deeply into one (*Wicked*), Wolf presents a substantial study of Broadway musicals' female relationships. Each of the first five chapters considers a specific decade, from the "golden age" of the 1950s to musicals with a multicultural focus in the 2000s. Associated with each decade is a theatrical stage convention or theme that contextualizes the place of female characters onstage: female duets of the 1950s; the "Single Girl" of the 1960s; ensemble-focused musicals of the 1970s; the relationship of female characters to scenography in megamusicals of the 1980s; and stories of women of color in the 1990s and 2000s. The selected works are accompanied by images of their original Broadway productions, visual reminders of several iconic female-centered moments on Broadway. Wolf pays attention to the context in which these musicals were created by providing a brief but sufficient historical, political, and socioeconomic backdrop for each decade. Several chapters include additional contextualization, such as an overview of the stagecraft and technology used in 1980s megamusicals.

Changed for Good is most provocative in its queer reading of the Elphaba/Glinda relationship in *Wicked*. In this case, Wolf uses "queer" to "reference intense female homosocialities, friendships, intimacies and kinships that are performed in a given musical" (18), and argues that "two women singing together in a duet, their voices intertwined and overlapping, their attention toward one another, can also signify as queer" (18). In this context and within the framework of the heteronormative conventions of musical theatre, Wolf makes a strong argument for a queer relationship between Elphaba and Glinda, whose connection is the most intense and important in the play. Also fascinating is Wolf's analysis of female voices and bodies, particularly in her discussion of the "Single Girl" of the 1960s. It is this solo female performer who subverts the typical "I am/I want" musical number (in which the heroine expresses her hopes and desires for the future) and creates an "I will/I can" number, in which she controls her own destiny and often her sexuality, expressed outwardly through choreography. She focuses on the centerpiece of the musical, its score, and in particular the revelation of female relationships through vocal range, specific harmonies, and the intertwining of voices.

One intriguing way Wolf sets her book apart from other musical theatre histories is in her final chapter, which takes as its subject "Internet Girl Fans." Here, Wolf investigates the impact of *Wicked* and the cult of the musical theatre diva on teen and preteen girls in the United States. With regard to audience reception, Wolf "tak[es] girls seriously as participants in culture" (222).

She draws on internet blogs and fansites (some entries are humorous, others insightful) in which young women discuss and analyze their experiences attending performances of *Wicked*, meeting stars at the stage door, their own female relationships, and the relationship of personal self-image to the characters in the musical. Wolf acknowledges the limitations of these sources as reliable markers of audience reception, but asserts their usefulness in “reveal[ing] some clear patterns of use, engagement, and utterances of feeling” (223). This chapter effectively argues that homosocial relationships among young women are influenced by the community they create as fans of musical theatre. It also gives agency to young women, who are often overlooked as participants in not only the consumption of popular entertainment, but its creation as well.

There are just two places where Wolf quickly touches on topics that beg more attention. Of the carefully selected representative musicals, *Rent* is the one glaring omission, since Wolf offers substantial discussion of race and ethnicity in musicals of the 1990s. In Wolf’s discussion of the ensemble-based nature of musicals in the 1970s, the reader is left longing for a more in-depth look at the women of this decade. Most successful is Wolf’s analysis of Cassie’s individualism versus her place in the ensemble of *A Chorus Line*. The section on *The Wiz* is most exciting in its discussion of race rather than gender, which may cause the reader to lose sight of the foregrounding of gender as this study’s point of departure.

As Wolf reminds the reader in her notes, the scholarly study of American musical theatre is a relatively new pursuit. This book is just the second that analyzes American musical theatre from a feminist perspective, the first being her own *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (2002), which focuses on four female actors of the 1950s and early 1960s. Equally academic and accessible, *Changed for Good* is a pleasurable read that will prove useful to scholars as well as students and fans of musical theatre. Wolf’s enthusiasm for her subject is infectious and inspires further investigation of feminist stagings of the Broadway musical.

—Colleen Rua

Colleen Rua is Assistant Professor of Theatre at Bridgewater State University where she teaches courses in theatre history, literature, and criticism. She is currently working on her book manuscript Coming Home: Representations of US Latinos in the Broadway Musical. She holds a PhD in Drama from Tufts University. colleen.rua@bridgew.edu

TDR: The Drama Review 58:1 (T221) Spring 2014. ©2014
New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century. By Kyla Wazana Tompkins. New York: New York University Press, 2012; 288 pp.; illustrations. \$75.00 cloth, \$24.00 paper, e-book available.

“Critical eating studies” is the framework proposed by Kyla Wazana Tompkins for the interdisciplinary cultural analysis she undertakes in this provocative book. Examining domestic architecture, novels, dietetic tracts, and color advertisements, Tompkins argues that beliefs and practices related to food and its consumption were instrumental in creating ideas about self and nation in 19th- and early 20th-century America. Eat the right foods, become the right kind of citizen is the basic idea she traces in assessing what she calls “the biopolitical life of the nation” (185). It is, as she points out, an idea that is still with us, as “like today’s locavores and food reformers, reform dietetics invited consumers to direct their desire towards virtuous objects, to substitute a hypervigilant digestive life for critical engagement with political and economic processes” (11). The book’s “overarching metaphor” (116) is that of indigestion, as white Americans struggled with notions of how non-whites might be devoured, spit out, badly digested, ejected,